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SUBJECT: GOC REOPENS WWII CONCENTRATION CAMP MUSEUM
AND MEMORIAL

¶11. (U) Summary and Comment. On 27 November, Croatia's top leaders commemorated the opening of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, an exhibition and education center on the site of a former Ustasha-run death camp at which tens of thousands died between 1941 and 1945. PM Ivo Sanader, President Stjepan Mesic, and Speaker of Parliament Vladimir Seks all spoke on the importance of remembering the past crimes that were committed and ensuring that such acts never happen again. Through a USG museum exchange program, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) provided technical advice over the past several years. Prior to the opening, some members of the ethnic Serb community criticized the exhibit for not adequately addressing specific conditions at Jasenovac such as the preponderance of Serb victims or fully communicating the horrors that took place there. The Ministry of Culture plans to amend some exhibits, and all agree that the museum is an important testimony of the past and learning tool for the future. Perhaps most notable is the clear language used by Croatia's leaders: while the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) of the 90s often cozied up to its Ustasha past, Sanader and Seks clearly condemned that time and those events. Speaking at the opening, Seks said that the camp is an "indelible stain of shame that has characterized the Ustasha regime as a reign of evil and inhumanity." Broadcast widely in the press, the memorial is a clear step forward for Croatia in acknowledging its ugly past. End Summary and Comment.

Condemning Its Past

¶12. (U) For perhaps the first time, Sanader and Seks both used the term "Ustasha" to refer to the Croatian war-time fascist government, while acknowledging unequivocally the crimes that were committed by Croatians. Speaking eloquently and clearly, Sanader called that dark chapter a "historically-failed and mindless time." He continued, "The truth cannot be hidden, it cannot be forgotten, it cannot be traded...the truth cannot have two faces...No political goal or any other goal can justify a crime." The PM's language against the Ustasha is a stark contrast to the revisionist history promulgated by HDZ leaders in the early 90s, when President Franjo Tudjman flirted with the Ustasha regime and introduced school textbooks that rationalized the past. Mesic underlined the distance from both the recent, nationalistic past and with the country's WWII fascist past: "Jasenovac leaves no room for doubt about how present-day Croatia sees events from WWII. Here there is no room for downplaying or diminishing the atrocities, genocide, and Holocaust that were committed in the Croatian name." In addition to the

PM, President, and Speaker, over 300 people attended the opening, including the Ministers of Education and Culture, local religious leaders, and ethnic Serb, Jewish and Roma community leaders, and representatives of the diplomatic community, including the U.S. Ambassador. About two-dozen survivors also attended the event, which was heavily covered in the national and international press.

Establishing the Truth

¶3. (U) Jasenovac was the largest of almost 40 Ustasha-run camps, in which Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Croatians were killed. Men, women, and children were subjected to horrific deaths. The camp has long been a source of controversy between Croats and Serbs: Some Serbs claim that there were 700,000 killed, while in the 90s Tudjman reduced that estimate to 40,000. Now, independent experts estimate that between 70,000 and 97,000 died at the camp. About 70,000 victims have been identified, the majority of whom were ethnic Serbs. Controversy still followed Jasenovac even up to the opening: president of the GOC-appointed Jasenovac Council Zorica Stipetic criticized the exhibits for not sufficiently attributing the crimes to a Croatian Ustasha regime against Serb victims, rather than being part of a Nazi Holocaust. Nor did the memorial communicate the unusual brutality that took place, according to critics. Concerns were largely addressed before the opening, and as Director of the Memorial, Natasa Jovicic told us, it is a living memorial that will be strengthened, amended, and expanded. Both Mesic and ethnic Serb MP Milorad Pupovac indicated that they saw the center as a work in progress. USHMM reps who attended the opening expressed satisfaction with the exhibits and information provided.

Memorial and Educational Center on Site of Camp

¶4. (U) The memorial and museum are located about 1.5 hours from Zagreb on the river border with Bosnia, on the site of the former concentration camp. In 2003, the State Department funded the demining of more than 280,000 square meters along the river, which was also the confrontation line during the more recent war in the 90s. The names of the almost 70,000 known victims hang on glass panels from the ceiling and exhibits include photos, artifacts, and video-taped testimonies of survivors. A multimedia information center and education center helps teach visitors - many of whom will be school children - about fascism, Nazism, the Holocaust, and other intolerance against minorities. With a grant through State Department's International Partnership Among Museums, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) cooperated with Jasenovac organizers at the Ministry of Culture. Over the past few years, the USHMM assisted in cataloguing, processing and conserving documents, and provided other technical advice for the educational center. Ministry of Education officials plan to organize a "traveling exhibit" to bring Jasenovac into Croatia's classrooms.

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